Portraying Empathy in Character Design

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Bachelor’s Thesis in Game Design, 15 hp

Program: Game Design and Graphics

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June, 2015
Abstract

This thesis examines possible improvement in evoking empathy through character design. The method used is research by design, by gathering information about emotions, emotional-and character design, and applying it during the design phase, two new characters were created based on an existing game character. The evaluation was done through a survey which concluded that the re-designed characters ability in evoking empathy was significantly stronger than the original characters. The characters ability in evoking empathy improved because they were more distinct when it came to expressing emotions through facial features and body language.

Keywords: Emotions, Empathy, Emotional Design, Character Design, Gender.
Det här arbetet undersöker möjliga förbättringar att väcka empati genom karaktärsdesign. Metoden som används är forskning genom design, genom att samla information om emotioner, emotionell- och karaktärsdesign, och applicera det under design fasen, två nya karaktärer är skapta baserat på en existerande spel karaktär. Utvärderingen görs med hjälp av en undersökning vars slutsats är att de nya karaktärernas förmåga att väcka empati ökade drastiskt till skillnad från original karaktären. Detta var huvudsakligen på grund av deras tydligare ansiktsuttryck och kroppspråk.

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Definitions

- **Anthropomorphic forms** – Visualization of human forms or characteristics in other creatures, objects or elements that are not human.

- **Uncanny Valley** – Uncanny is a combination of familiar and unfamiliar forms, and when they are close but not identical to, for example, a healthy human, the forms tend to be unappealing since they are strangely familiar instead of mysterious, which leads the viewer to get repulsed rather than attracted to the object, and is the effect of the uncanny valley. The “valley” refers to the dip in Miro (1970)’s graph that visualizes appeal of anthropomorphic forms against their degree of realism.

  **Example:** Robots and 3D computer modelled and animated characters are commonly placed in the dip of the uncanny valley when their attributes or animations are close but yet un-identical to a natural being. It can also be that the character looks like a realistic creature but the animations are not the same as in real life.

- **Baby-Face Bias** – A tendency to view characters and objects with baby-like characteristics, to have baby-like personal attributes, such as helplessness and innocence.
1. Introduction

Games have for a long time been seen as a medium for entertainment (Belman and Flanagan, 2010:5) and alleged to be violent and, as a result, promote anti-social behavior (Jacobs, 2014), but the interest in harnessing games power for prosocial causes is growing (Belman and Flanagan, 2010:5). By contrast, recent years have seen an increase in the number of games that emphasize emotions and empathy, among the field of indie games (Gone home and papers, please) and AAA titles such (Journey and Flower). Justin Amirkhani, Creative Director of Vagabond Dog, participated on PAXEAST 2015’s panel: All the feels: Empathy in indie game narrative (Video, 1d). He believed that “People don’t only look for fun in games anymore, rather engagement”.

Many games contain basic emotions, both in the context of showing them, for example through character design, and evoking them in players (Peppy pals, L.A. Noire and The Walking Dead series). But there are fewer which focus on more complex emotions such as empathy, although there are some games which focus on that specific emotion (Gone, This war of mine). Anna Megill, Creative Director of Project Untold says: “Games don’t need to be fun.. Games can be powerful and move players in a whole new level... that people take with them more, and remembers better than something that is “fun””.

Both Walter (2011:11-13) and Medina (2008:80-83) states that “Emotionally charged events persist much longer in our memories”. By evoking emotions, the player will remember the game more, and in return, the game will have a larger impact than a game that doesn’t evoke any emotions at all. Therefor by designing games to evoke the player emotionally could increase their enjoyment and attachment of the game, if they don’t dislike it from the beginning. It could also be possible to teach the player how to react upon emotions and promote pro-social behavior (Brief, 1992:310-329).

One way of doing such is through character design. Many games use characters in order to give the player someone who can interact with the world for them (Waggoner, 2009:7-9). This character works as a persona for the player, that it sometimes can identify itself with, and the fact that there are barely any studies made about empathy with game characters shows that the field hasn’t received enough attention.

The question this thesis explores is, How can character design affect the players’ ability to relate emphatically to the character? In able to do this the thesis will cover a literature study within the fields of emotions, emotional- and character design, followed by a re-design of an existing character to find out, Does the characters ability in evoking empathy improve?
1.1 Background
This chapter includes the research made for the design phase, in order to create characters to evoke empathy. First emotions are introduced, followed by emotional- and character design.

1.1.1 Emotions
Emotions are something everyone experiences to different degrees, this title covers the most basic ones and some complex emotions.

1.1.1.1 Basic emotions
According to Ekman (1992:169-200) there are six basic human emotions that we are able to recognize independent of our cultural background. The six basic emotions are anger, disgust, fear, joy, sadness and surprise, these emotions are often implemented in characters in able for the viewer to understand what the characters are experiencing (McCloud, 2006:80-101).

In most games the six basic emotions are present and they are important, but not essential, to evoke the player. Basic emotions can also be combined in order to evoke more complex emotions (McCloud, 2006:62-101), such as empathy.

1.1.1.2 Empathy
The word empathy herrends from the German philosopher Robert Vischer, who used the word Einfühlung, meaning to enter feelings or be with a person’s feelings, passions and suffering. The word has been used in aesthetics, describing the ability to get “inside” an appealing piece of work, for example, art (Vischer, 1994:89-123). This makes empathy relevant to games, which can be seen as an art-form (Video, 1b).

“The idea of getting “into” a feeling is particularly important when we see and feel the world from the other’s point of view, attempting to understand it, and seek to convey that understanding as we relate with those around us.” (Howe, 2013:6-19).

A common emotion to confuse with empathy is sympathy. The difference is that empathy puts oneself in others emotional shoes, while sympathy tells that you have walked there too. When someone is sympathetic, he or she has feelings that are same as others, while being empathic is to know, sense or even “enter” the feelings of others, but the state of mind doesn’t have to be the same (Bellet, Paul, Maloney and Michael, 1991:1831-1832).

Each individual vary in their ability to empathize, and the amount of empathy can shift depending on mood, situation or the people involved. Empathy is one of the more complex emotions and its popularity as a subject of study has increased steadily the past hundred years, but even more rapidly since the turn of the century (Howe, 2013:6-19).

Since the gaming industry is evolving and exploring new ways to interact with the player, such as learning and serious games, empathy could accordingly to Belman and Flanagan (2010:5-15) be implemented in purpose to increase player’s prosocial behavior and ability to empathize.
What makes empathy one of the more complex emotions are that it requires cognitive effort, especially cognitive empathy which is based on “seeing, imagining and thinking about the situation from the other persons point of view”, in order to do this, information of the person has to be shared, for example, personality, history or the situation, in order to set our minds into, imagining, what it might to be like that person (Howe, 2013:6-19).

1.1.1.3 Why it’s important
Freeman (2003:1.3) state that emotions can turn into profit, he answers the question “why put emotion into games?” with: artistic motivation and economy. Accordingly to Freeman, one of the reasons is to create richer ‘buzz’ for the player, stimulating them and making them excited by evoking emotions. Which leads to another important reason that Freeman (2003) discusses, which is to create loyalty to the brand. When the players’ and reviewers get an emotional reaction to games, that makes them write and talk about them.

Walter (2011:15) and Chris Lindland of Betabrand supports this theory. By giving the costumer (player) an emotional experience, will result in them spreading their positive experience with the product (game) but also encourage the audience to be loyal if things go awry.

Freeman (2003:1.3) gives an example of movie titles, such as Lord of the rings and spider-man, these films provided increase in game sales, because the costumers wanted to continue to be involved in the franchise.

But it’s not all about making profit. According to Chapman (2005:1-28), empathy is a profound human need, which chimpanzees, monkeys (Frans de Waal, 2005) and rats (Kevin Jiang, 2014) use as well. It’s an emotion that also can be practiced in able to improve the ability to empathize, but why?

By improving the ability to emphasize, conflicts could reduce by seeing issues and events from the other side of a dispute (Fisher, 1994; Rouhana and Kelman, 1994), which is a result of improved prosocial behavior, where empathy is a strong motive (Belman and Flanagan, 2010:5-15). It would benefit children and society as a whole.

“A consistent finding in the research literature is that empathy improves people’s attributes and behaviors towards other individuals or groups, while lack of empathy is associated with more negative attitudes and behaviors.”
(Belman and Flanagan, 2010:7).

1.2.1 Emotional design
This part will explain what emotional design is, how to use it and introduce some fields where it has been used before.

1.2.1.1 Objects
The term emotional design can be used in the context of design for a wide range of objects. Norman (2004) speaks of emotional design in the context of tea pots, souvenirs and cars while
Chapman (2005) goes deeper into emotionally durable design, to strengthen humans’ relationships with the objects they purchase in order to reduce our consumption and waste.

These authors bring up several factors that strengthen emotional design, such as contour- and baby-face bias combined with theories such as anthropomorphic forms and Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (Lidwell, Holden and Butler, 2010:62-63, 34-35, 26-27, 124-125). which has to do with psychology and science, how humans work. It’s a successful approach in designing a wide variety of objects, but is seldom referred to when creating games.

“Emotional design, which uses psychology and craftsmanship to create an experience for users that makes them feel... like there’s a person, not a machine, at the other end of the connection” (Walter, 2011: 2-3).

1.2.1.2 Designing for cognition
Emotional design can be applied to everything that is created, even when we are not using a product, we can usually see or feel it. Appealing design create positive emotional responses in the brain, which as a result, improves our cognitive abilities such as how we learn, remember, solve problems and pay attention (Norman, 2004:3-62).

Learning- and serious games especially focus on improving human abilities, such as cognition. Adam Gazzeling is an example who is working with serious games and has the ambition to “really make a difference”, by creating games that improves our cognitive abilities, such as paying attention (Neuroracer, 2013). He has also created a game called Body-Brain Trainer which combines cognition and movement to find out if cognition can be improved more by combining physical interaction, than one would learn cognitively alone (Clank, 2015). Considering that muscles and emotions are linked (Davis, 2010:40-433), Adam’s ongoing research may show revolutionary results for the future and is something that can be combined with character design for games.

Appealing character design that aims in evoking empathy could have a great impact in similar games as Neuroracer and Body-Brain Trainer, but also games such as Puppeteer or the Sly Cooper franchise.

1.3.1 Character design
Character design is to create characters which need to fulfill the needs of a game, storyline or whatever visual media where the character is represented (Bancroft, 2006:13).

1.3.1.1 Abstract or realism
There are several approaches to create characters because each artist has its own style and level of experience. But often the goal is to design characters which appeal to a large audience as possible. Accordingly to McCloud (1993:24-59) this is achieved by making the character as simplified as possible, with less realism by limiting the amount of details and characteristics.

Yet many games are striving for realism, making the characters and worlds as realistic as possible, even using technologies to copy humans and environments and implementing them
into games through 3D scanning (Demeulemeester, 2014). This is due to that the characters and objects appear more familiar the more realistic it appears, because it’s something we recognize from real life. But achieving realism is difficult, if not preformed correct the character or object might only appears partly realistic, and as a result the viewer might enter the uncanny valley (Lidwell, Holden, and Butler, 2010:242-243).

1.3.1.2 Expressing emotions
In order to bring a character to life it needs to portray a personality and evoke the viewer, two approaches achieving this is by giving the character facial expressions that communicates its emotions and a body language which support the emotion that the character express through its facial features (McCloud, 2006:62-101). Many times these two work together to tell a story for the viewer, telling what the character are doing and its emotional state, just as in real life, how we show and express our emotions.

The six basic emotions mentioned before are the same as the six basic facial expressions. McCloud (2006) compares the six basic facial expressions with color, telling that the basic facial expressions, just like the primary colors, can be mixed to achieve different outcomes. Different colors can be blended to receive a new color and facial expressions can be combined to express more complex emotions.

1.3.1.3 Story
Storytelling is uniquely human and is a method of creating imagery, emotions and understanding, orally, visually or textually (Lidwell, Holden and Butler, 2010:230-231). Stories are powerful and have the ability to grab and hold attention, help people process information and imply causation (Weinschenk, 2011:76).

By giving a character special traits, facial expression and pose, the viewer can infer much of the story, what the character is experiencing, by the scene that is represented. When applying them right, a character have been created that the audience can identify with, which is commonly used in film and television, but can also be used in games (Freeman, 2003:1.2).

“When you present your (character’s) personality clearly, your audience can relate to it as if it were just another human. It creates empathy and helps your audience see a better version of themselves” (Walter, 2011:15).
2. Method

The approach for this study is research by design and is limited to visual character design. Based on the findings of emotions, emotional- and character design, two different characters are created by re-designing Ori from *Ori and the blind forest*. The first design made is abstract with more human attributes than the original character and the second version is a human. The new characters share some of the original characters’ traits, but are designed to better evoke empathy. The design phase is followed by an evaluation which is done through a survey, investigating if the characters ability in evoking empathy is improved.

2.1 Previous study

*Ori and the blind forest* is a platform adventure game that is designed by Moon studios and published by Microsoft Studios. The game had release on March 11th 2015 for Microsoft Windows and Xbox One. Ori is the main character controlled by the player, and is a spirit creature that has to find its role within the world, which is the character re-designed in this paper.

I had investigated the emotional responses to Ori in a previous study, exploring Ori, among other characters ability in evoking empathy in the course Advanced Game Project. In the study *Evoke empathy through character design*, several screen shots, of total four characters were displayed to twenty study participants, while another twenty viewed game play footage from the same games, to judge if they felt empathy with the characters.

The result showed that of the participants viewing screen shots, fourteen out of twenty didn’t feel empathy towards Ori while fifteen out of twenty felt empathy towards Clementine, a character from the game *Walking Dead: Season one*. But Ori’s ability in evoking empathy improved when showing game play footage of the game, then sixteen out of twenty felt empathy towards Ori. This shows that a character can be enough when evoking empathy within the player through images, while Ori is not such a character.

Note that this does not imply that *Ori and the blind forest* is a bad game, just that the design of the original character may have other motivations than evoking empathy. Ori is just an example I’ve chosen for this thesis in able to demonstrate an approach to design characters aimed to evoke empathy.

2.2 Survey

To find out if the re-designed characters increase the ability in evoking empathy, a survey was developed to find out which character the participants easiest can relate to and if they evoke empathy. The survey was published between 25th of April to 10th of May 2015 and included the following questions:

- *Which character can you mostly relate to? A, B or C.*
- *Which character can you least relate to? A, B or C.*
In order to collect information, the surveys were spread through social media and meetings with some of the participants. Mainly Facebook Groups were used, which are pages that are created within the Facebook community that are based around different interests about, for example, certain people, objects or beliefs.

The following Facebook Groups were used:

- **Dreadheads (sv)**
  A group where swedes that have dreadlocks or just have an interest for the hairstyle gathers to discuss or just view other members hairstyles.

- **24Fitclub Visby**
  Is a closed group for members that are training Tabata together, which is a form of interval training.

- **Bloggens värd**
  People gather to share their own blog with people as well as viewing others.

- **My personal Facebook profile**
  On my Facebook profile all people that are on my friend list can view what I post and share their opinions about it.

The meetings that took place:

- **24Fitclub Visby**
  Some of the members of 24Fitclub Visby’s Facebook group I had a personal meeting with.

- **Facebook Profile**
  Some of the participants were interviewed at the comfort of mine or their homes.

### 2.3 Delimitation

The characters designed for this experiment will not be implemented into a game, and therefore it will not be possible to find out if the characters ability in evoking empathy improves during gameplay. But since character design is a broad subject and is used in different categories in visual media, the theories in this thesis could be implemented into all those fields in able to create emotionally evoking characters.

### 2.3.1 Risks

Belman and Flanagan (2010:9) propose a concept called empathic play, adapted from Stephan and Finlay (1999:729-743)’s research for creating empathy in intergroup relation programs:

> “Empathic players intentionally try to infer the thoughts and feelings of people or groups represented in the game (cognitive empathy), and/or they prepare themselves for an emotional response, for example by looking for similarities...”
between themselves and characters in the game (emotional empathy).” (Belman and Flanagan, 2010:10).

Without any effective empathic introduction most people will play un-empathically, but with a proper introduction the player may make an intentional effort to empathize.

If it’s true what Belman and Flanagan suggests, it’s possible that the participants in this study seeks for empathy mainly because they are asked doing so, therefore they are also asked if they can relate towards the characters, since to be able to relate towards a person or character is closely connected to the ability of feeling empathy (Walter, 2011:15).

Emotions have always been a sensitive subject and people don’t usually talk about them unless it’s with a person they trust, that’s why some people feel that emotional design is risky. Emotions reflect our personal experiences, associations and memories and no single product can hope to satisfy everyone (Norman, 2004:3-62).

“Showing emotion in design, as in life, is risky. Some people won’t get it. Some people will even hate it. But that’s okay. An emotional response to your design is far better than indifference.” (Walter, 2011:84).
3. Character development

This chapter contains the entire design phase, introducing the original character followed by description of the design process of the both re-designed characters.

3.1 Ori

Results of the previous study showed that many participants thought that Ori’s body language was indistinct and they thought it was difficult to understanding what the character was doing and expressing. It appears to be the main reason for confusion of the character. In order to prevent this, the goal was to take an existing pose, and make it as easy to interpret as possible.

![Figure 1: Original design of Ori.](image)

The pose in (Figure 1) was chosen because it was one of the most difficult to identify. What made the pose hard to interpret was the silhouette of the character; the ears and arms are blending in with the rest of the body which makes it hard to distinguish what is what. Stanchfield (2009:3-42) discuss the basics of animation and covers the most aspects to have in consideration while drawing or during animation in general, and one of the subjects are silhouettes, to distinctly present the different parts of the creatures anatomy.

The screenshot is also taken at a moment when Ori is most vulnerable, nearly starving to death trying to find food and looking carefully the surroundings for eventual enemies (Video, 1c). The scene shows sign of fear, which human’s natural response is to escape, or in this case for the viewer to interpret the feeling that is deeply programmed within us, which could contribute for the viewer to feel empathy by recognition of a shared experience.

“Fear triggers fast escape behavior whenever there is a hint of danger.” (Howe, 2013:11).
“Usually you react emotionally to a situation before you assess it cognitively, since survival is more important than understanding. But sometimes cognition comes first” (Norman, 2004:13).

3.1.1 Game world
The environment of the game takes place in a huge forest and the colors shift depending on what sequence in the game the player is. This is something I’ve kept in mind while designing the new characters in order to make them believable in the original world.

3.2 Abstract character
The first re-designed character has most resemblance to the original design of Ori (Figure 1). The purpose was to keep some of Ori’s aesthetics and maintain it abstract, but at the same time improve details to the character to make it more appealable in order to evoke empathy.

3.2.1 Silhouette
As the original design, the new characters would have a gender-neutral appearance in order to appeal to a wider audience and have more round shapes in order to make the character appeal as friendly as possible so the viewer don’t get intimidated by it.

The abstract re-design is by purpose resembling an animal, because it’s something humans relate to and that they are proven to evoke empathy (O’Brien, 2013). Yet it’s quite far from an existing animal, it’s an imaginary creature which has several human attributes, such as posture and its design based on the principles of the baby-face bias.

Figure 2: Sketches and silhouettes.

3.2.2 Face
In order to achieve baby-face bias the character received slightly larger head and eyes, while the nose and mouth remained smaller. This also gives the character baby-like personality attributes, such as helplessness and innocence, which is interpreted by all ages, cultures and many mammalian species (Lidwell, Holden and Butler, 2010:34-35). By giving the character a baby-like appearance and attributes, it might also evoke nurturing instincts within the viewer.
Ones the character had reached the state of (Figure 3) it felt like something was missing, the character didn’t evoke me and its facial expression felt weak, because of this more facial features were added. Moore (2014) states that by adding eyebrows it’s easy to increase emotions in a characters face.

While creating the facial expression I received inspiration from McCloud (2006:62-101) and his approach in combining different expressions to create more complex ones. According to McCloud, by combining fear and sadness the expression of devastation is created, which suits the character based on the scene that is played out (Video, 1c).

By adding eyebrows, wrinkles below the eyes and slightly changing the shape of the mouth, the character instantly received a more dramatic expression. Although when the character received a slightly open mouth (Figure 5), with intention to make it look more afraid, it had the opposite effect. Instead it appeared less afraid and more surprised, which wasn’t the goal, thereby the character received a closed mouth.

![Figure 3: Line art.](image1)

![Figure 4: Line art 2.](image2)

![Figure 5: Example of mouth open.](image3)
3.2.3 Color

Ones the line art was done (Figure 4) colors were added to the character. Through color, the intention was to make the character appeal friendly and innocent. This was done by using the colors white, blue and green. Colors mean different things in different contexts (Weinschenk, 2011:27) and the following colors are chosen for its relevance in the context of individuals/characters.

- **White**
  White is the brightest color that exists, some don’t even see it as a color, just a value to describe the lightness of a color, such as blue or green. The color white usually resemblance things that are “good”, friendly and peaceful compared to black which are usually associated with aggression and evil (Lidwell, 2013:1a).
  Since the main character is bright, almost white, with a hint of blue and green, the new character also received these colors because their meanings are relevant in creating friendly appealing characters.

- **Blue**
  Just as white, blue also represents things that are “good”, friendly, peaceful and pure. On the character, blue is used to create dots on the characters paws and tail, this highlights their position to avoid confusion, since it’s less likely that those parts blend in with the rest of the character.
  One of the goals were to give much details to the eyes in order to attract the viewer, since that’s the part of the face that draws attention the most (Weinschenk, 2011:10), but after several iterations I didn’t managed to make detailed eyes that matched the rest of the character due to it’s so bright. The brighter the eyes were made, the more they blended in with the rest of the character, by coloring the eyes dark it created contrast which causes the eyes to stand out which draws attention towards the face.

Figure 6: Different versions of the eyes.

- **Green**
  Generally green is an inviting color, in traffic lights green means go and in problem solving context small doses of green is told to “free our thinking” and “foster
creativity” (Lidwell, 2013:1a). Based on these facts, and that the game world is a forest, green is used to add final touches for the character, such as the line art and glowing aura that comes from the character.

By combining these colors the entire character appears turquoise, it’s an experiment blending the colors together this way, but hopefully the individual colors representation will have the same meaning when blending them together, which will be discovered through the evaluation.

Colors which didn’t work out:

- **Red**
  When having a hint of red in a human’s skin tone, that person appears healthy and attractive. Therefore red was implemented, but it didn’t turn out to be effective on this particular character. The red tone made the character appear aggressive or shy when the color was given a more pink tone.

- **Yellow**
  Red and yellow are both common colors for fear or danger, for example: red is used as stop in traffic lightning and yellow is used for warning of hazard materials. But yellow, just like red, is used to make skin tone more appealing (Gurney, 2010:156). By adding a hint of yellow the skin appears to be “glowing”, which is a sign of healthy skin. Yellow has also an effect to make people look sick, which was what happened when implementing the color to the character.

3.2.4 Final
The final character express fear and sadness through its facial expression and body language, these emotions combined with the colors and design principle of the baby-face bias makes the character appear helpless, innocent and friendly.

These attributes could evoke nurturing instincts within the viewer, making them feel with the character, wanting them to take care of it.

*Figure 7: Final version of character B.*
3.3 Human character

The second character has most contrast towards the original design of Ori. As with the original and previous character, I wanted to keep the design gender-neutral and use round shapes for the same reason, in order to make the character feel as friendly as possible and appeal to a wider audience.

I chose to create a human character because we, as humans, see ourselves in most things, which makes it easier for us to relate to something that appears human (Lidwell, Holden and Butler, 2010:26-27). We can easier identify human shapes and as a result give the viewer more time to focus on the details of the character.

Based on the fact that human shapes are easily identified is an argument why the previous character received human attributes as well.

3.3.1 Silhouette

While working on the silhouette, sketches were made of characters in different ages, from child to adult. I went through the same process as with the first re-designed character and made sure that the hands and legs didn’t blend in with the body.

Ones I’d found a pose that appeared distinct I worked with it further to make a more gender-neutral appearance since most of my sketches had female proportions, probably for the reason that I usually draw female characters.

![Figure 8: Sketches and silhouettes 2.](image)

During the process of coming forth with the final design I had the original characters game movements in mind and aimed to create a posture of a six to eight year old, so that the character would appear innocent but still be able to do more extreme moves than a smaller child would be capable of. To achieve this, the second and third sketch in (Figure 8) was combined and resulted with (Figure 9), which was what I was aiming for.
While the entire body is distinct and clearly shows all body parts, the hands had barely any expression at all. In order to solve the problem new hands were drawn, instead of the straight, emotionless appearance they were drawn more crouched, as the entire body, which gives the impression that the character is in a defensive state, since humans tend to be in a crouched position when they hide, sneak or defend themselves against something.

3.3.2 Face

Baby-face bias was also used for the second character. Although limitations were made on the size of the head to prevent the shape to look un-human, which could result in the viewer entering the uncanny valley.

The facial expression and pose is aimed to show the same expressions as the previous designs, to give the participants an equal judgement of each character. But the human version allows more details than the other designs, since it’s less abstract. This makes some details appear more appealing than if they would be implemented on the other characters, such as an open mouth and tears. It didn’t decrease the emotions of sadness and fear, instead it increased both expressions, making the character look devastated (*Figure 11*).
3.3.3 Characteristics

Ones the desired silhouette and facial expression had been created, different features such as clothes, accessories and hair were implemented.

Usually long hair is associated with women even though that’s not many times the case (Synnott, 1987:381-413), but in order to make the character appear like it belongs in a forest and away from civilization this felt essential. It was during this phase that inspirations from tribes were implemented, with its torn clothing and easily maintained hair.

With the original character and the words forest and tribe in mind I wanted to create a mystic appearance for the character, because of that dreadlocks felt like a suitable alternative. By giving the character dreadlocks it appears more gender-neutral and suits the mystic concept of the original game.

“Long or short hair, for instance, has been used as an identity of femaleness and maleness at different points in history and in different cultures. For dreadlocks, that is not the case… Everyone who wears dreadlocks has a historical, cultural, ideological or just a fashionable reason and significance behind doing so” (Arac de Nyeko, 2010).

Creating dreadlocks comes also with great risks since its one of the most misunderstood hairstyles in existence. “Never has a hairstyle been so dreaded and misunderstood, and generated so many rumors and beliefs.”(Arac de Nyeko, 2010). The article continues: “For most dreadlocks wearers, male or female, the question has not been ‘should I wear dreadlocks because it's accepted for my gender?’ … Dreadlocks are rejected despite the gender of the wearer”. Thereby it’s an alternative to increase the gender-neutral appearance, but there are risks that the viewers will dislike them for what they are.

By making the character look poor, this could create nurturing reaction towards the character, especially because it resemblance a child, and as a result increase the amount empathy evoked. With this in mind dreads are ones again a suitable choice of hairstyle, “Poor children, have bushy, urchin hair” (Arac de Nyeko, 2010).
While trying to achieve the appearance of a poor child exploring the forest, the clothes had to be flexible in order for the character to do extreme movements and be gender-neutral at the same time.

When the character received an item that wasn’t covering the chest, it appeared more masculine, and when the character received something that was similar to a skirt or dress it appeared feminine. Through several iterations the character had shorts which appeared equally neutral for both genders, but it was hard to figure out a garment equally gender-neutral to match the chest without being too modern.

Instead of having large accessories covering the chest, as to the right and left in (Figure 12), this inspired me to create a poncho which covers a large area of the chest but doesn’t limit the characters movement. With the poncho the shorts didn’t suit with the rest of the characters appearance, thereby they were re-made into a loincloth which had closer resemblance to the poncho and is something that’s worn by tribe members.

While having in mind that the clothes were going to be a darker color than the skin tone, I wanted something that added more light to the character. I received inspiration from the previous sketches I made and added some smaller accessories.

To keep the overall design as distinct as possible I didn’t want to add a necklace due to the poncho and its folds, which represent the material, or bracelets for the hands to decrease the possibility of removing attention from the hands expressions. Instead bracers were created for the feet to enhance them, since the legs overall didn’t have much details to them, but also that it might give an illusion of slavery, which could evoke empathy and pity for the character. With its massive appearance the bracers might appeal as shackles.
3.3.4 Color
When re-designing Ori to a human it takes away almost everything that the Original design was, but with details and color some of its characteristics are saved, and reflected in the new design.

- **Blue**
  By adding details with the same blue hue as Ori, it gives the essence of the original character. One of the details that received this color were the eyes, instead of having the entire character glowing, which also would have removed its human attributes, the character received large glowing eyes. It’s the opposite of the previous characters, but adds more mystic as a human character, does the character have some secret powers? Is it really human?

- **Green**
  On the second character green was used more, specifically on the clothes of the character. This was to make the character feel like a part of the world, possibly using the clothes as camouflage against enemies, yet not blend in with the environment too much so the viewer doesn’t have difficulties distinguishing it from the background.

- **Red and Yellow**
  This time adding red and yellow to the skin tone turned out successfully in combination with a light skin. The skin color was based on the original character, to make it light as possible but yet not to make the character too pale which could make it appear sick or alien-like, which the colors yellow and red prevented. If the character would have a darker skin tone he/she would be harder to separate from the game environment as well since the forest is dark at most sequences (Video, 1c).

- **Brown**
  By combining red, yellow and blue, brown is created, which are colors commonly used while creating skin tones (Gurney, 2010:156). The colors were also suitable for the character because of the meaning of each color. A second reason for the brown color choice for the hair was to use a slightly darker color to highlight the eyes and accessories, yet keep the hair light enough to get separated from the background, which the hair decorations provide with.
3.3.5 Final
The aim was to make the human character express the same emotions and attributes through the design as the previous character. It expresses fear, sadness, innocence and friendliness, but perhaps a little less helplessness.

This could possibly be improved by making the anatomy appear like a younger child, but I decided to keep the appearance in order for the study participants to share their opinions.

Figure 13: Final version of character A.

3.3.5.1 Size and line definition
The both re-designed characters were drawn in the same size, larger than the original character in order to scale the final versions without losing details. The line art received the same thickness on both the new characters while the main character has none, although the line art on character B (Figure 14) appears smaller because the final version was scaled down to a smaller size than character A.

The characters received their final size based on the image quality and my own cultural context. The image of the original character had low resolution and I couldn’t find a picture of the same pose that had higher quality, thereby the size was determined of the limitation of the images quality, if the image would be scaled larger it would appear blurred and more indistinct for the viewer, which could affect the results.

Ones the size of character C was set, the other characters were scaled to the same size. Character B appeared equally distinct as character C, while character A appeared too small and reminded of little people that have been a part of folklore in many cultures through history (Furtman, 2000). By scaling up character A it appeared more independent and not as weak as in its previous size, what made character A appear weaker than the others while in the same size could have to do with its thickness of the body, compared to character B and C, character A appears more skinny which contributed to it appearing weaker.
Since all three characters would be displayed in the same image it appeared un-symmetrical to have two characters in the same size while one had distinctly larger size, thereby character B was scaled to a size in-between of character A and C, to also find out if the characters size is a defining factor for the participants to empathize with them.

*Figure 14: all three characters.*
4. Evaluation

In total forty-two individuals participated in this study, they were between the ages of twenty and thirty and had never played or viewed images or video material of the game *Ori and the blind forest*. Forty of the surveys were handed in with Swedish writing and two were English, therefore most of the quotes received from the surveys are translated from Swedish to English.

First the participants were displayed an image of all three characters before answering the questions (*Figure 14*). On the first two questions the participants had three options to choose from, A, B or C. The first question received was the following:

**“Which character can you mostly relate to?”**

Majority of the participants related to character A, but character B received only four votes less then character A, which shows that approximate 80% of the participants related either with one of the redesigned characters over the original character. This shows that there isn’t any significant value differing the choice between character A and B.

![Figure 15: Result of question one.](image)

The second question the participants received was:

**“Which character can you least relate to?”**

The results of the second question shows again that the character that the participants least relate to is character C, but the ability to relate to the characters A and B is not as even as it was in question one, instead majority of the participants could relate more with character B than character A.

![Figure 16: Result of question 2.](image)

The results of the two following questions are summarized through the participants written responses which describe their emotions based on the characters. The diagrams show how many times a specific word was mentioned as an argument why they related towards the character in question.
The third question the participants received was:

“Motivate your answer. What made you choose the characters you did?”

- **Character A**
  The reason why participants could relate to character A was mainly because of its human attributes. “Character A has closest resemblance to a human, thereby my answer.” It was also the character that the participants thought displayed the most characteristics “One can clearly see her facial expression and overall appearance”. That the character displayed its own characteristics was also negative in the way that it was the main reason participants didn’t relate towards the character. “Alternative A feels more oriented towards a specific gender while the others are more neutral.”, “A has not my aesthetics and that’s why I relate to it the least”.

![Figure 17: Why participants related towards character A.](image)

- **Character B**
  The reason why participants could relate to character B was mainly because its appearance is more gender-neutral and abstract, but yet detailed enough to show human characteristics and emotions. “Even if the character is not human, it has human-like attributes. The animal-like creature is less specific and could be anyone, and is why I can relate to it.” This quote summarizes quite well the dominating opinions about the character (Figure 18). In total four participants agreed that they could relate to the character for the fact that it resembles an animal. Participants that couldn’t relate towards character B thought that the character itself was too imaginary, a “fantasy creature, which makes it hard to relate to”.

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Character C
In total eight participants related most with character C, but only six gave a motivation why. There were two words which were repeated twice to describe why the participants related towards character C, and the arguments were that the character appeared “scared” and “small” in size. This can only suggest that those are the reasons why participants overall could relate to the character, because it’s small and looks afraid of something. Others chose the character simply because “it looks cool”, “I like more odd characters” and one participant said “C resemblance me the most, unclear and least predictable, meaning that people don’t really know where to put me”. This could suggest that the reason why participants could relate to character C was because it’s the most abstract one, allowing the viewer to interpret its emotions and characteristics.
Character C was also the one which received most negative feedback among the characters, it appeared “tiny and pitiful” and “too diffuse” in order to relate towards it. Two reasons that made the character appear this way could be because it was “harder to distinguish its facial expressions and silhouette compared to A and B”.

The fourth and last question the participants received was:

“Do you feel empathy for any of the characters, which one and why?”
Figure 19: Empathy diagram.

(Figure 19) shows which character/characters the participants felt empathy for, if they didn’t feel any empathy at all, or decided to leave the answer blank. Below are the arguments why they felt or didn’t feel empathy towards a specific character.

- **Character A**
  The body language and facial expressions made it easy for the participants to feel empathy for character A since they could relate to the emotions that the character demonstrated. “It’s easy to see that the character is scared and sad.” Some could also relate to the fact that the character is a child, “The character resembles a scared child, which is easy to feel empathy and concern towards”. That helped the participants to put themselves in the characters shoes, one participant said “it looks like the character is afraid of someone/something and is detected by it”, imagining the character/oneself in a situation. But the major reason why participants didn’t feel empathy towards character A was since many thought that the character represented a girl, a role they couldn’t put themselves into. “The character is too specific; she has a special hairstyle, clothing and much that radiates HER personality and character”. (Figure 22)
- **Character B**
  The participants who felt empathy for character B thought that its body language and facial expressions were clear and made the character appear afraid. Some participants felt most empathy for character B for the fact that it was an animal and not human. “Character A is human which I can’t feel empathy for as easy as towards an innocent animal”
  Participants didn’t feel empathy towards character B since it wasn’t a realistic character, the same reason they couldn’t relate to it. “I relate towards B and C the least since they are fantasy creatures”. Some thought also that it was harder to distinguish the facial expression and silhouette compared to character A, which made it hard to relate to the character and feel empathy towards it. “It’s harder to distinguish the facial expression and silhouette in character B and C” and “B seems to have emotions I can’t relate to”.

![Figure 21: Why participants empathized with character B.](image)

- **Character C**
  The participants who felt empathy towards character C did it mainly because of its size and since it’s the most abstract character as mentioned before. Character C is the smallest one among the characters which makes it appear weaker than the others, “A small creature usually has to struggle more”.
  The ones who didn’t feel empathy for Ori couldn’t interpret what kind of creature it represented, what emotions it had and what was going on in the scene. They “relate to it the least since much of the human attributes are gone” and the “silhouette resemblance an insect” which contributed to that it was “hard to determine what emotions the character feel”.

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There were three individuals who didn’t feel empathy for any character and eight who only answered the first two questions and left the two last questions blank. The participants who didn’t feel empathy for any of the characters thought that they had emotions and was going through something that they couldn’t relate to, therefor they couldn’t “identify (themselves) in any of the characters”. One participant admitted to understanding that the character was scared but didn’t feel empathy towards it “All three characters look afraid for the smallest things, but well, I don’t feel any empathy to be honest”.

There were also three participants who felt the same amount of empathy towards each character, and they all had the same reason, “I feel the same amount of empathy towards all the characters since they have the same pose and facial expression, which makes it hard to choose one over the other”.

4.1 Summary

- **Character A**
  Most participants could directly relate with character A because of its human attributes, but there isn’t any significant difference of participants preferring character A over character B because it only differs with four votes.
  What made the participants feel empathy was also the characters human attributes, more specifically the body language and facial expressions that made it easy for the participants to feel empathy since they could relate to the emotions that the character demonstrated.
  The reason participants didn’t relate or feel empathy towards A was mainly because the character was too specific and had too much feminine attributes.
• **Character B**

Nearly as many could relate to character B as the amount which could relate to character A, the reason participants related towards B was because it’s more abstract than A, yet more detailed and has more human attributes than C. Many felt empathy towards the character for the same reasons, but also because it resembled an animal more than human and that it expressed its emotions clearly. The reason participants didn’t relate or feel empathy towards character B was mainly because they thought that the character was too imaginary.

• **Character C**

The first two questions show significantly that participants related least with character C because it’s too diffuse, but the participants who could relate with the character however did it mainly because it’s the tiniest and most afraid among them. They felt empathy towards the character for the same reasons but also because it was the most abstract among them. The participants couldn’t empathize with the character mainly for the same reason they couldn’t relate to it, because it was too diffuse and abstract. Some participants said it was too imaginary and even resembled an insect.
5. Analysis

When the participants gave a motivation why they related towards a specific character, they sometimes used the same argument in the fourth question as well.

The following quotes are from the same participant:

Answer in question three: “I relate mostly with A because I clearly can see her face and appearance”. Answer in question four: “I feel empathy towards character A because it looks afraid, the facial features are distinct”.

Sometimes they even said: “I empathize with (character of choice), for the same reason I mentioned before”, using the exact same motivation twice. This suggests that the participants had the same motivation for why they related toward a character and why they empathized with it. If this is true, it’s possible to see a more distinct result out of the survey, answering why they empathized with the character.

5.1 Character A

By combining the answers why participants related and empathized with a character gives a more distinct overview.

(Figure 23) shows the result why participants related and empathized with character A, there isn’t any significant difference between “Scared” and “Face and Pose”, but when it comes to the character’s human attributes there is a significant amount who related more to the character than they who empathized with it.

But most participants that related towards the character also empathized with it and one of the reasons could be because of its human attributes, even if they don’t specifically mention it in
the fourth question. So this doesn’t necessarily mean that they related towards the character because it’s human, and didn’t have the same argument when empathizing with it.

5.2 Character B

On the previous work several participants empathized with Ori mainly because it’s “cute”, while in the result for this thesis the word is barely mentioned. I find this quite odd, could it be because the original character barely have any other expressions and characteristics aside from its cuteness? Compared to the new designs, which express more of the characters emotions, such as fear, that leads to the participants getting a larger impact of the traits that expresses the emotions rather than its cuteness?

It could possibly be the combination of the both, only that the appearance isn’t mentioned in the same way as the emotions that are expressed. Since cute objects are something that appears desirable in a wide variety of cultures and personalities, it can appear odd that the word isn’t used more as an argument in this study, or perhaps the participants didn’t state that because it was obvious to them.

Figure 24: Summary for character B.

5.3 Character C

This study strengthens the results received from my previous study of Ori that the character isn’t designed to evoke empathy, compared to the new versions of Ori. There were few who selected Ori in the survey which made it hard to find a significant answer in why they chose the character (Figure 25).
What the results of each character have in common is that participants relate towards each character because of its appearance, if it’s human, animal or just small, but empathizes with the characters because they look scared. While the diagram suggests that they relate less with the characters based on the emotions they express and doesn’t empathize as strongly based on their appearance.

This suggests that while designing characters to evoke empathy it must first be visually appealing to the audience, but express emotions for the viewer to empathize with it. If the player can relate or empathize with the character it’s playing, that could possibly increase the relationship between the player and the game world as well, which could lead to increased engagement to the game.

5.4 Size, Line and Contrast

Other factors that could have contributed to the participants feeling empathy is size, line and contrast. As mentioned, few participants have stated that they empathize and relate to the characters because of their smaller size, but there is no statement about the line art or contrast. This could possibly be because the participants weren’t designers or artists and don’t have the experience of having such details in mind, and instead see the characters all aspects at ones.

That doesn’t mean that line and contrast didn’t have any impact on the improvement of empathy evoked, since both are factors creating the characters. The lines helps to separate different body parts and frame them, separating different areas and also create contrast between them.

5.5 Color

The fact that no one mentioned anything about the color of the characters, suggests that the color choice was a success. By blending different colors in the right context shows to be effective. Although it would be interesting to change the colors of the characters and display each version to a new group of people to find out if the colors chosen for this study were appropriate or didn’t have any significant matter.
As it’s hard to design for everyone, it’s challenging to choose colors, since different colors don’t only mean different things in different contexts, but also different things in different cultures.

5.6 Gender
The largest error in the design phase was the final version of character A, since it turned out not to be gender-neutral which was the goal. But at the same time it gave an interesting outcome, if I hadn’t made that error I wouldn’t have noticed that many participants seem to be able to relate more with animals than humans, more specifically the female gender.

It’s unsettling that people seem to have easier to empathize with animals than humans, possibly because humans are associated with harmfulness and thereby not empathize with them. No participant stated that humans are injurious, but some participants said that animals are innocent, does that make humans the opposite of innocent? One participant said “Character A looks prepared to run away from the danger if needed” stating that the character can take care of itself, which an animal can’t. Is that all that there’s to it? Or is it a combination of both, that majority of humans represent independence and harmfulness, while animals are innocent and helpless?

But it’s slightly disturbing that participants can’t relate or empathize with the human character, because it appears feminine. Instead the participants related towards an animal. But if the character would be masculine, would the outcome be the opposite? Would it increase the empathy for character A?

Having in consideration that still images were used instead of video- or gameplay material, it requires more cognition from the participant in order to interpret what the characters are experiencing, why they are in need of empathy. This could have to do with agency and equality, that we can imagine how humans act and that they have the capacity to act independently, while animals might more immediately deserve our empathy, especially if it’s a small sized or young character.

Therefor perhaps it’s not about the gender of the character that participants relate or empathize less, or more with, rather that they need to know more of the human characters history in able to empathize with it compared to an animal-like character.

5.7 Reflection
This study has focused on 2D representation of characters in a specific poses, but the theories can be used while designing characters for 3D as well, and if a character is animated or displayed through several images its appearance could have less significance compared to a character that isn’t moving, because when adding a character to a scene there are other components which add to the story and has to be carefully thought through, while a single frame only can express itself.

This is viewed in the previous study how participants didn’t empathize with Ori when displayed through screenshots but evoked empathy through video material. It’s difficult to
draw a conclusion especially since the new characters haven’t been implemented into a game to find out a difference in the amount of empathy evoked depending on the character. This gives an opportunity for further study by implementing one of the new characters into the game and find out if its ability in evoking empathy improves.

5.7.1 Gathering data
The approach of collecting the data for the surveys may have affected the results. When I turned to social media my goal was to find as neutral groups as possible, people who don’t have significantly stronger emotional connection towards something, for example animal right activists or people who are in the design industry.

This made 24Fitclub Visby, Bloggens värld and my Facebook profile into appropriate groups to gather information since they include a wide variety of people and those who have experience with the game or are within the design or gaming industry wasn’t allowed to participate. Dreadheads (sv) on the other hand might have been an un-appropriate option since the members are especially attached to dreadlocks, although this didn’t show any significant difference in the evaluation which makes the group an accepted source of data in this matter. Only one participant mentioned that “Character A has similar hair to mine” and was the reason he/she related towards the character.

Another thing that could have affected the results is the participant’s interpretation of the word empathy, since it is commonly confused with sympathy. In order to prevent this, the word empathy was described in the surveys but not the difference between the both emotions as in the surveys for Evoke empathy through character design, which might have been a mistake not to use in this study as well.
6. Conclusion

The evaluation concludes that the character with most animal-like appearance evoked most empathy among the participants. This could partly be because of the flaws in the design of the second character since it turned out not to be gender-neutral as aimed, which had an effect on the outcome of the surveys. Based on the design error the result showed that people rather empathize with animals than humans, more specifically the female gender. Aside from the design mistake, both new characters show a significant increased ability in evoking empathy within the viewer.

The unexpected result of gender effecting people’s ability to empathize, a further study would be interesting in this manner. To find out which gender people have easier to empathize with and if it’s related to gender.
7. Reference

7.1 Games
11Bit Studios. (2014). *This war of mine*. 11Bit Studios.
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Rockstar Games, Team Bondi. (2011). *L.A. Noire*. Rockstar Games

7.2 Videos


7.3 Studies


7.4 Articles


**7.5 Books**


8. Appendix

Below are the RAW statistics from the surveys, thereby most of the answers are in Swedish. If it’s hard to read the statistics on the pictures, visit:

https://alexandrahytonen.wordpress.com/2015/05/26/raw-data/
Below are the surveys that the participants received, the first one in Swedish and the second one in English.
Emotioner i karaktärsdesign

Denna studie är inför min C-utbildning i ämnet speldesign och grafik, du behöver inte ha någon kunskap inom ämnet för att delta och alla deltagare kommer att förbliva anonyma. För att förtydliga den sista frågan i formuläret så kommer en kort förklaring om känslan empati nedan.

Empati är förmågan att förstå och känna med andra. Att kunna placera sig själv i en annan skor.

Vilken karaktär kan du relatera till mest?
- A
- B
- C

Vilken karaktär kan du relatera till minst?
- A
- B
- C

Motivera ditt svar. Vad var det som fick dig att välja de karaktärerna du valt?


Känner du empati för någon av karaktärerna, vem och varför?


Skicka

Skicka aldrig lösenord med Google Formulär.
Emotions in character design

This study is for my bachelor thesis in game design and graphics. You don't need to have any knowledge in the field in able to participate in this study and everyone will be anonymous. To make it easier for you to answer the last question I'll shortly summarize the meaning of the emotion empathy.

Empathy: The ability to understand and feel what another person is experiencing, the capacity to place oneself in another’s shoes.

Which character can you mostly relate to?
- A
- B
- C

Which character can you least relate to?
- A
- B
- C

Motivate your answer. What made you choose the characters you did?

Do you feel empathy for any of the characters, which one and why?

Skicka

Skicka aldrig lösenord med Google Formular